

Contained but not restrained

By LOUISE WREGE - HP Staff Writer | Posted: Saturday, September 3, 2016 6:00 am

BENTON HARBOR — Proposals to transform 600 acres in and around the harbors between St. Joseph and Benton Harbor into vibrant waterfront areas will soon be displayed in a new temporary gallery in the Benton Harbor Arts District.

Two shipping containers renovated into a gallery by Andrews University students in Oronoko Township were placed by crane Friday at the corner of Territorial Road and Fifth Street. The gallery will display the work that led to the 80-page Twin Cities Harbor Study, which was published by the university and released in February.

Peter Colovos, principal with Prairie Real Estate Group in Benton Harbor, said his company commissioned the students to redesign the containers, which were just four blank walls, into a functional gallery.

He said they were the same students who worked on the study in the fall.

“We love the fact that we’re right down in the heart of the action in an ... urban area,” he said. “Urban development is our specialty. Renovation and rehab and reuse and repurpose is our specialty. For us, what better place than a place that needs help. As part of that, you’ve got to create the vision, too.”

Colovos said the containers can be reused later as another art gallery, field offices or storage space. He said Prairie Real Estate is turning a third shipping container into bathrooms and storage space. A spiral staircase will lead to a rooftop deck on one of the containers.

“It’s designed so we can add other containers around it in the future,” he said.

He said the gallery will be ready by Sept. 16 for the next PechaKucha on Transformations, which will be outside at The Livery just down the street from the gallery. The doors open at 7:30 p.m. with the event starting at 8:30 p.m. More information can be found at www.pechakucha.org/cities/st-joseph/events.

Michael Wychers, an architect with Prairie Real Estate Group, said he worked with the college students as they designed the containers and then brought their designs to life.

“The point was to be able to with relative ease pick it up and set it down,” he said.

He said they insulated the walls and ceiling, installed electricity and added windows.



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Architect Michael Wychers shows off the interior of two shipping containers installed Friday in the empty lot next to the Federal Building in downtown Benton Harbor. The containers will house the Twin Cities Harbor Study project gallery.

“They had some alumni who came who showed them how to weld,” he said. “They did welding and steel cutting – some things that the students aren’t capable of doing, but they all learned and they all had different jobs.”

In addition, he said the students built a table that will go into the gallery. He said the students used a lot of reclaimed lumber that was at Prairie Real Estate’s warehouse.

Colovos said some of what will be displayed in the gallery was at the St. Joseph Krasl Art Center’s ArtLab April through June. But, he said, much more will be shown in the container gallery.

He said he sees a lot of potential in the harbor area, and he wants to see the area grow.

“(The harbor) is an economic engine,” he said.

John Egelhaaf, executive director of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, said he has been holding talks about the study ever since it came out. He said his agency worked with the university students by designing the methodology behind the study, pulling data together and hosting meetings.

His said his work with the study will continue as a Harbor Conservancy is formed. He said the conservancy will be a blend of public and private people who will present possibilities to the public. He said the study was never about presenting what should be done in the harbor, but about showing “what ifs.”

Contact: lwrege@TheHP.com, 932-0361, Twitter: @HPWrege